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Promotion and protection of human rights: human rights questions, including alternative approaches to improving the effective enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms

United Nations Human Rights Training and Documentation Centre for South-West Asia and the Arab Region**Report of the Secretary-General****Summary*

In its resolution 60/153 of 16 December 2005, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to give their support to the establishment of a United Nations human rights training and documentation centre for South-West Asia and the Arab region, to conclude an agreement with the host country regarding its establishment and to make available resources for the establishment of the centre. The present report provides an overview of the activities carried out by the Office of the High Commissioner towards the establishment of the Centre in cooperation with the authorities of the host country, Qatar. This includes allocation of financial and human resources, submittal by the Office of the High Commissioner of a draft agreement with the host country, selection of a building to establish the Centre and launching the recruitment process of one international staff. The report identifies some of the pending issues while concluding that the opening of the Centre in 2006 remains achievable.

* This report was submitted after the deadline given in the relevant resolution of the General Assembly so as to include as much up-to-date information as possible.



I. Background

1. The process to establish a United Nations human rights training and documentation centre for South-West Asia and the Arab region was initiated at the Twelfth Workshop on Regional Cooperation for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in the Asian-Pacific Region, held in Doha from 2 to 4 March 2004, where the Government of Qatar offered to host the Centre in Doha. A number of intergovernmental meetings as well as the Commission on Human Rights in resolution 2005/73 of 20 April 2005 welcomed the proposal to establish the Centre. The Strategic Management Plan of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for 2006-2007 mentioned the Centre as one of the field presences of OHCHR that would contribute to implement the trans-regional strategy.

2. On 16 December 2005, the General Assembly by its resolution 60/153 requested the Secretary-General and the Office of the High Commissioner to give their support to the establishment of the Centre with the mandate "to undertake training and documentation activities according to international human rights standards and to support such efforts within the region by Governments, United Nations agencies and programmes, national human rights institutions and non-governmental organizations". The Centre will contribute to "the continuing cooperation and assistance of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in the further strengthening of the existing regional arrangements and regional machineries for the promotion and protection of human rights, in particular through technical cooperation which is aimed at national capacity-building, public information and education, with a view to exchanging information and experience in the field of human rights". The resolution makes an explicit reference to the World Programme for Human Rights Education, the implementation of which began on 1 January 2005.

3. Several Governments in the region, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and United Nations agencies have encouraged OHCHR to establish the Centre. Governments recognize the need to encourage democratic reform, good governance, strengthening of the rule of law and the promotion and protection of human rights. They perceive the Centre as an asset in this respect. NGOs in the region have expressed hope that the presence and activities of the Centre will strengthen civil society and contribute to facilitate its participation in human rights programmes and activities.

II. Concept

4. The functions of the Centre will be exercised as mandated by the General Assembly and in line with the High Commissioner's own mandate, as defined in resolution 48/141 of 20 December 1993, the Plan of Action submitted by the High Commissioner in 2005 (A/59/2005/Add.3) and the High Commissioner's Strategic Management Plan for 2006-2007, as well as OHCHR regional strategies. The Centre will operate in partnership with governmental, intergovernmental, and non-governmental institutions, and in full independence from any government. The administrative, financial, procedural, personnel and other organizational structures will follow the rules applicable to the United Nations Secretariat. At the request of OHCHR headquarters and OHCHR regional representatives, it may conclude and implement technical cooperation agreements.

5. The Centre shall be located in Doha, Qatar. The Centre will encourage broad participation of countries of South-West Asia and the Arab region to participate in its activities, both of a regional and/or country-specific nature. The primary languages of activities will be English and Arabic, with the possibility to conduct activities in French, or other relevant languages. Training activities may use online technologies for Virtual Learning Environments while the documentation should include online access to digitized documents and catalogues.

6. It is understood that the Centre, which covers countries falling under three of OHCHR geographical units (Africa, Arab region and Asia-Pacific), will work in close coordination with the regional representatives in the field, heads of country offices, human rights units of peace missions and coordinators of regional units at OHCHR headquarters. The Centre will work particularly in close cooperation with and under the guidance of the Regional Office in Beirut for activities in the Arab region. Though the Centre differs on several accounts, including its mandate, from the Subregional Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa located in Yaoundé, there will be room for exchanges of experience or development of common learning and documentation tools.

7. The Centre will report to the High Commissioner for Human Rights on the activities it carries out, pursuant to its mandate and functions, as well as on the circumstances that would have facilitated or impeded its work. It will also propose recommendations on future actions.

III. Functions of the Centre

8. With the overall objective of disseminating and strengthening a human rights culture and increasing human rights expertise at the regional and national levels, the Centre will contribute to address specifically two of the four implementation gaps identified in the High Commissioner's Plan of Action, namely, the knowledge gap and the capacity gaps of rights-holders and duty-bearers (A/59/2005/Add.3, paras. 24-27).

9. As prescribed by its mandate and under the authority of the High Commissioner, the Centre will provide training and expertise on reporting procedures to treaty bodies, and assistance in preparing user-friendly tools and manuals as well as training of trainers for Government officials, relevant professional groups (lawmakers, law enforcement officials, lawyers and the judiciary, social services, education experts) and other stakeholders.

10. The Centre will develop information and documentation systems on human rights, especially in the Arabic language. This includes (a) establishing a reference library of documents and publications on human rights in Arabic and other relevant languages; (b) building computerized databases on intergovernmental organizations, key governmental departments relevant to the rule of law and human rights, NGOs, status of treaty ratification; (c) reporting on and translating human rights documents; and (d) developing an advanced website and research facilities.

11. The Centre will work with national human rights institutions. This includes (a) strengthening existing institutions by training their staff; (b) supporting networks among, or meetings of, various national human rights institutions; and (c) providing publications and information on the international human rights system.

12. The Centre will contribute to strengthening civil society by supporting the capacity-building of NGOs, and collaborating with universities and centres for human rights education and research. The Centre will help NGOs' networking efforts, support the implementation of joint projects and provide ad hoc grants, if funding can be secured.

13. To contribute to the implementation of the World Programme for Human Rights Education launched in 2005, the Centre will devote particular attention to human rights education programmes and professional training programmes according to international and national human rights standards. It will advise State and non-governmental entities on such programmes and will cooperate with the media, develop public awareness campaigns and organize public human rights events. If funds are available, the Centre would also establish a grant programme for human rights activities in schools.

14. Specific activities will be developed for regional and subregional intergovernmental organizations such as the League of Arab States, the African Union, the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Union of Maghreb States, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference in order to contribute to human rights training and education activities within their policies and those of their Member States. This includes exchanging information, providing training courses to staff members of these organizations, assisting in building their documentation and implementing joint events in relation with the Centre's mandate.

IV. Implementation of the resolution

15. As required by resolution 60/153 of the General Assembly, staff and financial resources were allocated by OHCHR for the current biennium (2006-2007). The Centre will be headed by one international staff at P-4 level and two locally recruited staff, to be financed from extrabudgetary resources. OHCHR initiated the recruitment process of the international staff who will start the local recruitment of the two additional staff upon deployment in Doha. The current staffing level is based on an assessment of the workload during the inception period. This does not preclude the possibility of revisiting the size and level of the staff, were the workload to develop faster than expected. The permanent staff will rely on external resource persons and partner institutions to assist in delivering training. The permanent staff will also seek partnerships to establish a documentation and resource centre, possibly with a university in Doha. As it expands its activities, the Centre could also consider creating positions for Junior Professional Officers.

16. In line with the estimated workload, extrabudgetary resources amounting to 255,320 United States dollars (excluding the 13 per cent management fees), were allocated for the 2006-2007 biennium. These decisions can be revised as the Centre proceeds with its activities, and once OHCHR is in a position to gauge the response the Centre elicits and the support it receives from its local, regional and international partners.

17. OHCHR submitted a draft agreement with the host country on 2 June 2006, and is now expecting formal comments from the Government of Qatar. OHCHR has been informed by the Government of Qatar and the Office of the Legal Counsel that the ratification of the Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations is at an advanced stage. Qatar also indicated that the ratification of the

Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of Specialized Agencies is under consideration as OHCHR intends to involve specialized agencies of the United Nations in the activities of the Centre. The Office of the Legal Counsel has pointed out that it is preferable that the host country be party to both Conventions.

18. OHCHR undertook a mission to Qatar in June 2006 to move ahead towards the agreed goal of inaugurating the Centre in 2006. The mission of OHCHR continued the dialogue with Qatari counterparts on pending issues such as the draft agreement, staffing, location of the documentation facility and partnerships with institutions in Qatar and elsewhere in the region. The mission was able to reinforce previous contacts and to identify new potential partners from civil society and public institutions and to establish links with the Regional Office in the Arab States of the Gulf of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Several partners reiterated their keen interest in the opening of the Centre and their readiness to cooperate to address knowledge and capacity-building needs.

19. With support from two representatives of the Department of Security and Safety, the mission clarified United Nations security requirements for its premises and visited several buildings with Qatari counterparts. After the mission, OHCHR confirmed in writing to the Government of Qatar its interest in one of the buildings to allow the authorities to rent it as part of their envisaged contribution for the Centre.

V. Conclusion

20. The preparations for the establishment of the United Nations human rights training and documentation centre for South-West Asia and the Arab region are now at an advanced stage and OHCHR remains convinced that it can start its operations by the end of 2006.

21. OHCHR is looking forward to its growing cooperation with the authorities of the host country and welcomes their offer to provide premises free of charge and to facilitate missions, thus continuing the cooperation that has taken place over the past years. OHCHR is equally looking forward to finalizing the host country agreement, preferably after the Government of Qatar ratifies the two Conventions on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations and Specialized Agencies, as well as a medium-term funding agreement. The latter would facilitate the planning of activities and the development of a documentation and training facility of regional importance.

22. OHCHR and the host country encourage other countries, from the area and beyond, to contribute to the funding of the Centre so that it can rapidly become an institution of reference in the field of human rights training and documentation, benefiting the people of South-West Asia and the Arab region.